



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

---

Elohim City: A Participant-Observer Study of a Christian Identity Community

Author(s): Somer Shook, Wesley Delano, Robert W. Balch

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (April 1999), pp. 245-265

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.1999.2.2.245>

Accessed: 17/09/2012 17:01

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Elohim City: A Participant–Observer Study of a Christian Identity Community

---

Somer Shook

Wesley Delano

Robert W. Balch

**ABSTRACT:** This paper describes a participant-observer study of Elohim City, a notorious Christian Identity community in eastern Oklahoma that has been linked to right-wing terrorist activities. Our study focuses on the community's beliefs, values, and social organization as these were revealed in our observations of everyday life. The paper includes an assessment of the danger posed by Elohim City and concludes with our personal reactions to the community.

Located in the Ozark Mountains of eastern Oklahoma, Elohim City is a Christian Identity community whose opposition to the federal government has embroiled it in controversy. Like other Identity groups, its members believe the true Israelites settled in northern Europe and the British Isles after the Diaspora. In this paper we provide an ethnographic description of Elohim City based on a brief participant-observation study we conducted in 1997.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Identity movement has been growing since the 1930s, it did not receive much attention from the media until recently.<sup>2</sup> Several events brought the movement to national attention. The first was the death of Gordon Kahl, an Identity believer who was killed in a shoot-out with the FBI in 1983.<sup>3</sup> Believing that the government was controlled by a satanic cabal of Jewish bankers, Kahl quit paying taxes in 1967 and soon emerged as a leader in the Posse Comitatus movement, which recognized no legal authority higher than the county sheriff. Kahl went

into hiding after killing two federal marshals who tried to arrest him, and, after his own death five months later, he became the Identity movement's first martyr in its battle with the federal government.

In the following year, Robert Mathews, a white supremacist with ties to Aryan Nations, was killed in a gun battle with federal agents. In 1983, Mathews had organized a terrorist group known as The Order, which saw itself as the vanguard of the "second American revolution." Mathews hoped to trigger an apocalyptic race war that would usher in a God-centered, all-white nation. His plan included murder, bank robbery, counterfeiting, and armored car hold-ups, but by 1986 most of his followers were behind bars. Although Mathews was primarily an Odinist,<sup>4</sup> many of his followers were Identity believers.<sup>5</sup>

The third and perhaps most important event was the Randy Weaver stand-off in 1992.<sup>6</sup> Although Weaver believed in Identity's "Israel message" and had attended events at the Aryan Nations compound near his home in northern Idaho, he was more a survivalist than an activist. After failing to appear in court on an illegal weapons charge, federal agents laid siege to his house, killing his wife and son before he surrendered. Anti-government sentiment had been simmering in right-wing circles for many years, but the Weaver incident precipitated an outburst of public indignation. Suddenly the "racist right" was thrust into the national spotlight as "citizen militias" began forming across the country to oppose gun control and federal tyranny. Identity leaders such as Pete Peters and Louis Beam played major roles in the formation of the militia movement.<sup>7</sup>

Except for a few regional news stories, Elohim City kept a low profile throughout these developments. Few had heard of the community before the federal building in Oklahoma City was bombed in 1995. Almost immediately, evidence surfaced that Timothy McVeigh, the government's prime suspect, had called Elohim City just days before the bombing, apparently trying to reach an acquaintance named Andy Strassmeier who had allegedly conducted weapons training there.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent investigations revealed other incriminating information: Four bank robbers from the Aryan Republican Army had spent time at Elohim City; the community's founder, Rev. Robert Millar, had close ties to Richard Snell, an Identity minister who was executed for murdering a black state trooper and Jewish store owner; and James Ellison, former head of the militant Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord, had married one of Millar's granddaughters and was now living at Elohim City. Suddenly this once obscure community was making national news. In 1997, a *Dateline* story called it "The Holiday Inn of Hate" because so many right-wing terrorists had visited there.<sup>9</sup>

Our description of Elohim City differs sharply from the picture painted by the media. Although the allegations about terrorist connections may be true, we did not investigate them. Instead our

purpose was to understand members' everyday lives. We wanted to find out what people at Elohim City believe, where they fit in the Identity movement, and how their community is organized.

## **STUDYING ELOHIM CITY**

Our study was prompted by the media attention Elohim City received after the Oklahoma City bombing. Early in 1997, Balch wrote to Millar asking permission to visit with several students from his collective behavior class. After discussing this request with his congregation, Millar cordially agreed. During spring break, we drove to Oklahoma where we spent the better part of six days living at Elohim City.<sup>10</sup> Although we were encouraged to take part in many activities, we were more observers than participants. However, Shook and Delano returned in June for an additional three-week stay, during which they became fully immersed in community life.

On our first visit we had the good fortune to arrive during the week of the spring equinox, when Elohim City celebrates its new year.<sup>11</sup> In addition to going to "meeting" (church) every day, we ate lunch and dinner in members' homes, played volleyball with the teenagers, and participated in costume parties for the adults and children. Ironically, considering Elohim City's reputation as a hate group, the adult party had a 1960s theme, complete with peace signs, love beads, tie-dyed clothes, karaoke, and Beatles tunes played by the community's band. The festivities helped reduce the anxiety that both we and the members felt about our visit. As we soon discovered, many members were just as nervous about being scrutinized by liberal college students and a university professor as we were about visiting an armed white separatist community.

Because of our unique status as guests and students, we were allowed to take pictures, record church services, and conduct interviews.<sup>12</sup> One member graciously moved out of her mobile home so we would have a place to stay. Others allowed us considerable latitude by not enforcing the 10:00 P.M. curfew that applied to unwed adults. However, we realized that we were not getting a complete picture of everyday life. Members were reluctant to talk about certain topics. Millar, for example, preferred not to discuss the community's polygamous relationships, and it was not until mid-week that a teenage girl let it slip that he had two wives. Race also was a sensitive topic. The adults typically spoke respectfully about blacks and Indians, but from the children we heard racist jokes and occasional comments about "niggers."

The return visit proved far more revealing. Delano and Shook lived in separate households and, outside of church, saw each other only occasionally. Their daily routines were identical to those of other young

adults. Shook tended children, cooked, cleaned, and weeded the garden with other women, while Delano worked in the sawmill and spent evenings discussing race, politics, and religion with his boss. For fun they watched videos with their host families or went bridge jumping at the river and shooting with the teens and young adults. Both were placed in positions of trust—for example, by being asked to chaperone the teenagers at a rodeo in nearby Fort Smith. Since the population of Elohim City is only about ninety, including about forty children, members' lives are an open book to each other. On this second visit, polygamy was discussed freely, and members' racial views quickly became known.<sup>13</sup>

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Elohim City nestles on 400 wooded acres in a remote, mountainous area of Oklahoma about thirty miles from Sallisaw (population 7,122), the nearest town. The last six miles of the road to Elohim City are rough dirt. From the road the most conspicuous building is an exotic three-story house constructed of wood, stone, and bright orange polyurethane. Further up the road a silver, dome-shaped structure, also built of stone and polyurethane, serves as the community's church and all-purpose meeting hall. Nearly all the houses are mobile homes, some with rock facades and numerous rooms added on. They vary greatly in size, upkeep, cleanliness, and furnishings. Such differences provided the first indication of the high degree of individuality present within the community. Here and there one sees broken glass and scraps of paper littering the grounds, and behind some houses we observed old tires, discarded equipment, and junked appliances. Members dress like ordinary people, and except for special events, most wear casual clothes at church services.

*Elohim* means God in Hebrew, but at first glance there is little about Elohim City to suggest it is a spiritual community. The church has no cross inside or out, and the homes are virtually devoid of religious pictures or books. Nor are there any indications that Elohim City is a white separatist community—no racist literature, uniforms, swastikas, or guard dogs are visible, although two men usually brought weapons to church (a Mini-14 semi-automatic rifle and a .45 caliber pistol). The only hint of racism is a Confederate flag hanging in the window of one of the houses.<sup>14</sup> Despite the relative scarcity of visible signs or markers, Elohim City is both deeply religious and dedicated to racial separation.

### **CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: BLENDING RACE AND RELIGION**

Although Identity is a diverse nondenominational movement, its adherents are united in the fundamental belief that northern Europeans are descended from the lost tribes of Israel.<sup>15</sup> The evidence they use to buttress this claim includes similarities between Hebrew words and northern European place names. For example, they link the tribe of Dan to the Danube River, which the Israelites supposedly crossed in their migration over the Caucasus Mountains, and to Denmark (“Danmark”), one of the places where they settled. Millar claims additional evidence comes from such sources as archaeology, heraldry, biblical descriptions, and prophecies.

Most Identity believers regard the Jews as impostors posing as God’s chosen people. In more radical Identity groups, such as Aryan Nations, Jews are believed to be direct descendants of Satan, who seduced Eve in the Garden of Eden.<sup>16</sup> The result of this union was Cain, who fathered children with women from nonwhite races created before Adam. On the other hand, true Israelites descend from Adam and therefore God. According to this “two seed-line” doctrine, the Flood was a localized event intended to purify the Adamic seed-line, so Cain’s descendants, the ancestors of the Jews, were spared. Less extreme Identity believers, including Millar, discount a direct biological link between the Jews and Satan. Rather, they trace contemporary Judaism to historical events such as Esau’s marriages to nonwhite Hittite women and the conversion of the Asiatic Khazars to Judaism.<sup>17</sup>

A principle tenet of the Identity movement is that a secret Zionist conspiracy controls the world financial system and is working covertly to destroy the white race. The United States government is commonly referred to as ZOG, standing for “Zionist Occupied Government.” Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans are seen as pre-Adamic races who are pawns in the Jews’ attempt to rule the world.

Although Identity believers acknowledge the divinity of Jesus, they claim Jesus was not a Jew. In their literature they focus much more on the Old Testament than conventional Christians do, and talk far more about Yahweh than Jesus. Members typically follow ancient Hebrew dietary laws and, in keeping with Old Testament practices, sometimes approve of polygamy. In contrast to mainstream Christianity, they tend to be militant when confronting what they perceive as evil, often to the point of taking up arms. Identity believers are heavily represented in the current militia movement.<sup>18</sup>

Like fundamentalist Christianity, Identity has a strong pre-millennialist flavor. Believers are convinced that the world is corrupt and must be cleansed of evil and apostasy before the Second Coming

can occur. Catherine Wessinger calls this belief “catastrophic millennialism.”<sup>19</sup> However, Identity’s view of the final days differs sharply from that of evangelical Christians. Whereas fundamentalists usually anticipate an apocalyptic nuclear war,<sup>20</sup> Identity believers are more likely to envision a time of economic collapse, social chaos, and racial strife during which Jews and nonwhites will be vanquished. Adherents reject the fundamentalist belief in the Rapture, the spiriting away of born-again Christians from the earth at the beginning of the Tribulation period. Arguing that there is no scriptural basis for this doctrine, they claim that Christian Israelites must be prepared to endure the coming conflict. This is why so many Identity believers are survivalists.<sup>21</sup>

### **ELOHIM CITY AS AN IDENTITY COMMUNITY**

Elohim City was founded in 1973 by Robert Millar, a former Mennonite from Kitchener, Ontario, who was born in 1925. While studying to become a Mennonite preacher, Millar experienced a devastating loss of self-confidence while giving a sermon. After the congregation had left and he was alone in the church, he prayed for guidance and suddenly began speaking in tongues. Later he had apocalyptic visions, in which he claims God showed him the coming war for independence in India, the social chaos that soon spread throughout Africa, and the advent of nuclear war with missiles rising from the sea off the coast of Cape Canaveral. As he delved deeper into the Christian scriptures, he developed beliefs similar to those of the Identity movement without realizing that others had already come to similar conclusions.<sup>22</sup>

Eventually a vision led Millar to Oklahoma where he founded Elohim City. By then he had learned about Identity’s Israel message and had embraced it. Yet, as we quickly discovered, Elohim City has a unique character that sets it apart from better known Identity groups such as Aryan Nations, Pete Peters’ LaPorte Church of Christ, and Dave Barley’s America’s Promise Ministries.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Aryan Nations, Elohim City is not blatantly racist, and members do not revere Hitler or decorate their church with German flags and swastikas. We also heard little militant anti-government rhetoric. In contrast to all three groups, where members live in widely scattered households and are united mainly by a common ideology, Elohim City is a geographically-based community where all members live on the same piece of land.

During our first visit to Elohim City, we pressed Millar to explain his version of Identity theology. Instead of expounding on his beliefs, however, he encouraged us to read a book by a Christian writer, Roger Rusk, whom he said was not Identity but “on the right track.”<sup>24</sup> Although

Rusk traces Judaism to the corruption of Judah during the Babylonian exile and the subsequent conversion of the Khazars, he does not demonize the Jews like most Identity writers, and nowhere does he suggest they might descend from Satan. Rusk argues that the United States was founded by the descendants of Israel, and while Millar agrees, he is careful to note that not all Caucasians are Israelites—only those who descend from Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel.

Our primary reason for visiting Elohim City, however, was not to study Identity beliefs, but to learn about everyday life. Five themes emerged in our observations: (1) worship, (2) family and heritage, (3) community, (4) racialism, and (5) separatism. These constitute core values which give the community its distinctive character.

### **Worship**

At the center of community life is the unshakable belief that God is an ever-present reality. Unlike other Identity believers, members refer to God as Yahuah rather than Yahweh. The name dates from a prayer meeting where a woman began using the name Yahuah while speaking in tongues.

Most members go to meeting every day to sing praises and offer thanks to Yahuah. Participation is voluntary, and a few members rarely attend, but most take part unless they have other responsibilities. Services begin at 11:30 A.M. and often last several hours. The meetings have a strong Pentecostal flavor, perhaps reflecting the fact that most members come from conservative Southern Christian backgrounds. They are informal, spontaneous, and participatory, beginning with singing and dancing in unison.

The songs are catchy, upbeat tunes written by community members, and everyone knows them by heart. Millar claims they have at least 150 of their own songs. Though written by a nonmember, one of the favorites is “Step Into the Water”:

Step into the water.  
Wade out a little bit deeper.  
Wet your feet in the water  
Of His love.

Oh, oh, step into the water.  
Wade out a little bit deeper.  
Angels join our singing  
Praises to the Lamb of Yah.

It's time that we the people  
Stand up for what is right.



It's time we squared our shoulders back  
And raised our swords to fight.

Our war is in the spirit.  
The Word of Yah we bring.  
His praises we are singing  
Are banners to the King of Kings.

While singing, members pantomime the words. In "Step Into the Water," they step forward and back, raise their arms in praise, square their shoulders, and hold up imaginary swords. Members obviously enjoy themselves in meetings, and we found the singing both fun to participate in and to watch.

Sometimes Millar preaches, but often he simply sits on the sidelines while others who feel "anointed" speak. Our favorite speaker was "Brother Leon," a newcomer to the community in his seventies, whose daily "slice of bread," as his impromptu sermons are called, was always impassioned, funny, and uplifting. Unlike sermons common in fundamentalist churches, we never heard anyone talk about sin or God's wrath. And in contrast to sermons at the Aryan Nations' churches, racial issues were never mentioned except during the spring break field trip when Millar briefly explained Identity beliefs for our benefit. Instead, the main theme was that Yahuah is a God of love.

Spontaneous testimonies and prayers for healing are common in meetings. On our first day at Elohim City, for example, each family stood before the congregation and talked about what Yahuah had done for them in the previous year. Any family member could speak. One thanked Yahuah for being able to live in a loving community separate from the world. Another praised Yahuah for giving him a son after seven girls, who were lined up in a row from the tallest to the smallest. Millar made a point of involving us by having us stand and tell what we were thankful for. After the testimonies, a woman prayed over a baby with jaundice, and Millar's wife Elsie, who had suffered several strokes, was put in the "Secret Place." Members gathered around her, laying on hands and speaking in tongues, while one prayed aloud for Yahuah's blessings. Although the impromptu ceremony was totally public, its name implies a deeply personal connection between Yahuah and the person being prayed for.

Unlike many Identity groups, Elohim City is more experiential than ideological. The community has virtually no literature, and we found it hard to get a clear description of members' beliefs, even when talking with Millar. When we asked Millar to send us information about Elohim City prior to our first visit, we received photocopies of two hand-outs totaling ten pages and a copy of Roger Rusk's book. Books and magazines from other Identity groups are conspicuously absent in

members' homes, and politics is rarely discussed in meetings, except when it impinges on Elohim City. In sharp contrast to other Identity groups, talks in church typically focus on Yahuah's blessings rather than on scriptural or historical justifications for racial separation or the belief that northern Europeans are the true Israelites.

### **Family and Heritage**

These themes are too intertwined to separate. Both are constantly celebrated in daily meetings. Families sit, pray, and sing together, and they often give testimonies about how Yahuah has strengthened the bonds between husbands and wives, parents and children, or how Yahuah has blessed them as a family. With few exceptions, parent-child bonds are strong, and in every case, the elderly are cared for at home. Following the Old Testament model, polygamy is accepted and three men, including Millar, have two wives. Large families are the norm. A man who wanted to marry an elder's daughter was given permission, but only if he tried to get his vasectomy reversed.

During our first day at Elohim City, one of the most common questions we were asked was, "What's your heritage?" Each family has its own flag, symbolizing its northern European lineage or biblical roots. For the 1996 New Year's party, each member researched an ancestor and devised a costume resembling clothes the person might have worn. At celebrations, members of Scottish descent, including Millar, sometimes wear kilts, and later in the summer of 1997 members planned to drive their bus to Ontario for a Scottish folk festival. *Riverdance*, a video featuring Irish line dancing, was popular among both adults and teenagers.

### **Community**

Although members live in financially independent households and do not own property communally, they support Elohim City by tithing and place great value on the spirit of community. The beliefs uniting them are constantly reinforced in daily meetings, which are social as well as spiritual events. Members work and play together and have few contacts outside the community. All but two men work in the community, and recreation—including parties, picnics, canoe trips, vacations, and evening socializing—is an in-group affair. Children and teenagers are integrated into adult activities in a way that most people in the world would find unusual. Members talk about "the land," their mountain

home, with a sense of place that is uncommon even in small towns with long histories. When we asked people why they chose to live at Elohim City, their answers stressed the interconnection of community, family, and security: It is a good place to raise a family; their friends and family live there; they do not have to worry about drug dealers and homosexuals corrupting their children.

A constant round of celebrations reinforces the sense of community. In addition to New Year's week, they include five Old Testament holidays: Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>25</sup> Each celebration is unique. For example, during the Feast of Trumpets, a group of members, young and old alike, go through the community blowing horns and banging on pots and pans to wake everyone up. The men then cook and serve the women and children breakfast. One woman told Shook that the women usually end up helping, but that the role reversal is still fun. During the Feast of Atonement, members draw names by age groups and make gifts for each other or give IOUs for babysitting, massages, housework, and other chores. When the gifts are presented, the givers are expected to say something positive and meaningful about the recipient.

The intimacy of the community was revealed during our first visit when members wrote New Year's resolutions and put them in a bowl. A woman pulled each one out and read it aloud, after which members tried to guess who had written it. In almost every case, they were right on the first guess. Despite the highly personal nature of some resolutions, no one seemed embarrassed, and with each new resolution members laughed and shouted encouragement.

### **Racialism**

By mainstream definitions, Elohim City is racist, but compared to the Ku Klux Klan or Aryan Nations, its racism is mild. Members reject the white supremacist label, preferring to call themselves "racialists." The term reflects the belief that the Bible, Genesis in particular, teaches that God made the races distinct for reasons of his own, and that race mixing is an abomination. Although Millar rejects the theory of evolution, his theory of human origins departs significantly from traditional Christian teachings. Based on the fact that the Hebrew Bible uses different words for "man," Millar claims that God created different races of people at different times. Adam and Eve, his final creation, established the white race and are the ancestors of all true Israelites.

During our first visit to Elohim City, Millar cited the Eskimos to illustrate the destructiveness of race mixing. Their customs, he said, were perfectly adapted to their environment, but the introduction of

white culture upset their social equilibrium, resulting in alcoholism, violence, and the obliteration of their way of life.

Members claim they are not white supremacists, and we found some evidence of that. For example, an elder told Delano that he believes the Japanese are intellectually superior to whites. However, the line between separatism and supremacy proved to be a blurry one. The same elder went on to explain that whites still are Yahuah's chosen people, and that the Bible was written exclusively for them. Millar also told us that the original U.S. Constitution, which he believes was divinely inspired, supported racial separation by limiting citizenship to land-owning, white males. Like other Identity believers, members believe in an international Zionist conspiracy, but they do not talk about it much. A teenager once referred to Jews as the "serpent's seed," but otherwise the supposed satanic lineage of the Jews, which figures so prominently in the beliefs of other Identity groups, was never mentioned.

Although Elohim City's racial beliefs have a theological basis, the racism we observed was the type one might expect to find in ordinary white, working-class families in the rural South. Unlike Aryan Nations, which publishes dozens of books, pamphlets, and flyers proclaiming the superiority of whites, the immorality of blacks, and the diabolical character of the Jews, racism at Elohim City surfaced mainly in informal settings. During the 1960s party, for example, a fringe member referred to Martin Luther King as "Martin Luther Coon," and while watching the *Riverdance* video, the teenagers groaned when the leading male dancer kissed a black singer. One evening in our mobile home, a boy sang us a song about killing Barney, the purple dinosaur on a TV show promoting multiculturalism. When we asked why he wanted to kill Barney, he said that underneath his purple costume, Barney is really a "nigger."

### **Separatism**

A bumper sticker on Millar's car best expresses this theme. It reads, "Stop the Hate, Separate!" Given the community's beliefs, especially about race mixing and worldly corruption, it is not surprising that members choose to live "off the grid." To avoid trouble with the law, members get drivers licenses, register their vehicles, and buy auto insurance. Some, however, do not pay taxes, and most refuse to participate in the Social Security system.

Not only is Elohim City geographically isolated, but it comes close to being institutionally complete, in that most needs can be met within the community.<sup>26</sup> Nearly all the men are employed by three businesses, each owned by an elder—a trucking company, a sawmill, and a construction firm. Only one woman, a part-time K-Mart checker, works

off the land. The rest are stay-at-home housewives who rarely leave the community except for family outings and shopping trips. The community has its own K–12 school, Bethel Christian, where students are expected to learn ancient Hebrew in addition to conventional subjects. While members use conventional medicine when circumstances demand it, they prefer alternative remedies such as herbal teas. Two women have nursing degrees, so members rarely have to seek care from doctors, and twice a month a chiropractor visits the community and performs adjustments in the church. Babies are born at home, and children are not immunized. Most members have friends who live off the land, but they often belong to other rural Identity communities, such as Daniel Wright's Padanaram community in Indiana. In the rare event that someone marries an outsider, the person is likely to come from one of these communities. Members rarely vote and, except for Thanksgiving, Mothers Day, and Fathers Day, they do not celebrate worldly holidays. They use the ancient Hebrew calendar, and their clock is based on sun-dial time.

## **SOCIAL ORGANIZATION**

To understand how Elohim City is organized, we have divided our observations into several categories: (1) authority, (2) family ties, (3) sex role, (4) child rearing, (5) teenagers, (6) deviant behavior, and (7) boundary maintenance.

### **Authority**

At the center of the community is Millar, who is revered as a gentle patriarch. He is the community's spokesman and has the final word in all decisions. Yet his operating style is quiet, conciliatory, and geared toward building consensus. Known as "Grampa," he is respected for leading by example. Although he is outspoken about his political views and has confronted law enforcement officials in potentially violent situations, Millar sees himself mainly as a spiritual teacher and counselor. Unlike many Identity leaders, he prefers to stay out of the limelight. His single-wide mobile home is nicely furnished but modest compared to others, and he is doing most of the work himself on the house he is building for his second wife.

Beneath Millar are the elders. The principal elders are John and Bruce Millar (two of Millar's four sons, who all live at Elohim City), Jim Ellison, and Zera Patterson. David Millar, another son, and Brother Leon also are considered elders, although they are less influential. The primary criteria for becoming an elder are commitment to the

community and, like Millar, leading by example. At the conclusion of the 1960s party, John spoke to the teenagers about the social, political, and cultural upheavals of the decade, and Zera described how he went into the Vietnam War as a gung-ho patriot and came out feeling betrayed by his government. Their talks were thoughtful and inspirational, befitting their position.

Decisions affecting the community are made by Millar and the elders, but community members are asked for their opinions during meetings, when anyone can speak. For example, our initial request to visit was discussed at length in church. Our strongest supporters were the teenagers and an elderly man who actually voted for Bill Clinton in the last election. After the field trip, Balch was quoted in a newspaper article about Elohim City entitled, “‘Mellow’ compound has dark underbelly.”<sup>27</sup> Displeased, Millar wrote a letter to Balch barring him from the community, but members urged him not to send it because no one had asked Balch not to talk to the media. Millar did not send the letter, and when Balch returned for a brief visit in June, Millar greeted him warmly.<sup>28</sup>

### **Family Ties**

Elohim City resembles a clan because members are so intertwined by blood and marriage. Over half the members are Millar’s children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren. Of the five major families, four are headed by Millar’s sons, and only the Patterson household is largely unrelated to the Millars. There is just one case of marriage between cousins, but the pool of eligible partners who are not biologically related is small. During our study, two young people were dating members of other communities.

Polygamy is acceptable, but only three men have two wives. Plural marriage is a matter of choice for men, but less so for women. An unmarried woman can choose not to enter into a polygamous relationship, but a married woman is expected to submit if her husband wants to take a second wife. Although we observed few conflicts in these relationships, there may have been much that we did not see. One woman described how she broke up her husband’s second relationship by threatening to leave, and, in another case, the first wife suffered from depression and severe weight loss when her husband decided to marry again. However, at least one polygamous relationship appears to work well. The wives live in separate homes, but tend each other’s children and are best friends.

On Father’s Day in 1997, we joined the Millar family at Tenkiller Lake, a popular camping spot in eastern Oklahoma. Most members spent the afternoon swimming, boating, and water skiing. Jim Ellison assumed the role of chef, cooking hamburgers and hot dogs (no pork) over a

campfire while the fathers opened presents from their children. What impressed us most was the wholesomeness of the scene. Even the most determined eavesdropper never would have guessed this was a gathering of militant white separatists.

### **Sex Roles**

The roles of men and women are clearly defined at Elohim City. Men are breadwinners, decision makers, mechanics, builders, and defenders of the home, whereas women are homemakers and helpmates who take care of children and teach school. During church meetings and celebrations, women prepare the food and serve the men, and at home they do virtually all the cooking and housework. Members see this arrangement as part of God's blueprint for a perfect world—a divinely inspired division of labor based on mutual respect for different talents and roles. Yet we noticed that when husbands are away, wives often take a holiday by letting the housework lapse, serving snacks instead of cooking meals, and drinking an occasional beer.

Although husbands and wives spend most of their leisure time together, men and women live in somewhat distinct worlds, much as they do in the outside world. Recently the women began holding occasional "ladies' meetings" where they trade massages and discuss family problems, home remedies, and shopping bargains while joking good-naturedly about their husbands. Shook compared the meeting she attended to a slumber party. Men's meetings focus on decisions affecting the community as a whole, and when men want to have fun together, they may go hunting or target shooting. Although some men occasionally drink beer, this usually occurs at family picnics such as the Father's Day outing we attended.

### **Child Rearing**

Children at Elohim City are well behaved, courteous, and socially precocious around adults. During our first visit, children sought us out and were the first to make friends with us. Yet there is great variation in child-rearing practices. Most parents are strict and do not hesitate to use corporal punishment. We observed two fathers using switches to discipline their babies when they cried in church, although we did not consider these incidents abusive. On the other hand, at least one parent is extremely permissive, rarely using any form of discipline. Parents also differ greatly in what they let their children watch on television. Some parents screen videos and forbid certain TV shows, while others pay little attention. Boys and girls learn early in life what is expected of

them. During birthday celebrations, for example, each boy escorts a girl to the child whose birthday it is and Millar instructs them how to behave as gentlemen and ladies. The boy bows to the girl, and the girl curtsies in return, then both salute the celebrant. We found it interesting that nowhere in the community are children allowed to have toy guns. War, we were told, is not a game.

### **Teenagers**

Like the children, the teenagers at Elohim City are extremely social and comfortable around visitors. Although they are more integrated into the adult world than most teens in mainstream life, they constitute a tight group of friends. Some are more popular than others, but we observed little of the clique formation that goes on in typical high schools. Dating poses a problem because there are so few members of the opposite sex who are not closely related. This is the principal reason some members look for partners in other communities.

Compared to the high schools we are familiar with, the education the teenagers receive at Elohim City would be considered inadequate. The textbooks are old, science classes lack proper laboratory equipment, and the curriculum varies depending on who is teaching and what their interests and skills are. During the 1997 high school graduation ceremony, when the graduates were asked to read essays about what they had learned, Shook and Delano were shocked at how poorly prepared they were. They compared their performance to that of eighth and ninth graders in the schools they had attended. Few graduates go on for higher education. One elder told us that he encourages teenagers to experience the world after graduating, but of the three who graduated in 1997, two planned to remain on the land, and the third hoped to attend massage school after marrying a man from another Christian community.

### **Deviant Behavior**

Within the community most rules are informal understandings about what is permissible and what is not. Sanctions range from good-natured jabs to expulsion. For example, a young woman who had two unwed pregnancies was told she either had to get married or leave the community. Sometimes deviant behavior is discussed in church. In one case, when the community was rife with gossip, an elder admonished members not to talk about others behind their backs. However, he did not single out any offenders.

Like many other communal societies, as well as American society in general, Elohim City grants considerable latitude to teenagers.<sup>29</sup> Adults



know teenagers secretly drink beer and smoke cigarettes, but they usually look the other way. At the 1997 graduation party, for example, a few adults knew the teenagers had spiked one of the punch bowls, but they kept it to themselves. Yet by worldly standards, the teens at Elohim City are model citizens. We never observed or heard of a case of theft, drunkenness, vandalism, or drug use, and teenagers behave respectfully toward adults.

Consistent with Elohim City's nonideological stance, we found considerable tolerance for dissenting opinions. Despite the general sentiment against Jews, for example, an elder told Delano that he thought the biggest mistake the "reactionary right" (his term) has made is blaming everything on the Jews. Most Jews, he said, are ordinary people who have no idea what the big picture is. The same man also disagreed with the "revisionist" view, popular in Identity circles, that the Holocaust never happened. Another member told Delano that he felt uncomfortable with the way members used the term "nigger" so freely. He added that many blacks he had met were friendlier than whites. During Delano and Shook's visit, an elderly couple moved onto the land to retire. Although Christian, they were not Identity believers, and the husband had spent much of his career as an agricultural scientist helping black African nations improve their crop yields.

### **Boundary Maintenance**

Every society has marginal members who define the limits of acceptable behavior. At Elohim City the most conspicuous fringe members were three neo-Nazi skinheads living in a cabin off the land about a mile down the road. During our visits, they attended church occasionally, and two worked at the sawmill. One told us he was disappointed when he came to Elohim City because he expected to find an armed compound of militant racists ready to do battle with ZOG. Despite feeling let down, he said he had come to appreciate the community's peaceful lifestyle.

The community keeps the skinheads at arm's length for several reasons. Members believe they drink too much and are too volatile. They question the skinheads' commitment to leading a spiritual life, and they feel uncomfortable with their blatant neo-Nazism, which is apparent in their tattoos and the Nazi flags in their house. Members also dislike skinhead music. When we asked Millar how he felt about us visiting the skinheads, he said we were free to do what we liked, but that we should keep our "backs to the wall." His concern grew out of rumors about methamphetamine labs in the area. He worried that the skinheads might be involved and that we might get caught up in a raid by law enforcement officials.

### **HOW DANGEROUS IS ELOHIM CITY?**

Whatever the truth behind the rumors of drug labs, Millar's concern about the possibility of a raid is grounded in past experiences. Twice before he had been involved in armed standoffs with law enforcement officers. The first happened when federal agents wanted to search the grounds for a member of The Order who allegedly was hiding there, and the second occurred as a result of a child custody dispute. In both incidents, Millar and several armed men confronted law enforcement agents on the road, and violence was narrowly averted.

Elohim City's reputation as a paramilitary compound stems in part from these confrontations. Members are heavily armed and prepared to fight, yet we rarely saw guns except during target shooting outings. Although paramilitary training reportedly has occurred in the past, it did not while we were there, and Delano, a gun enthusiast himself, was unimpressed by the teenagers' ability to shoot.

The community's conflicts with the law grow out of members' belief that Yahuah's laws take precedence over worldly laws. A strong antinomian theme runs throughout community life, which is reflected in members' reluctance to register births and, in some cases, to pay income taxes. Shortly before Shook and Delano's second visit, an elder was arrested for trying to shoplift a set of kitchen curtains from a Wal-Mart store, even though he had hundreds of dollars in his pocket. His justification was that Wal-Mart is an unfair corporation that drives local stores out of business. Instead of punishing the offender, Millar and others spoke out in church against the gossip triggered by the incident. The attitude Delano and Shook heard expressed most often was that the offender was justified but foolish because his actions brought the community bad publicity.<sup>30</sup>

Even if Elohim City's alleged connections with right-wing terrorists are true, we find it hard to believe that the community itself poses any threat. We found that despite their radical beliefs, members are mainly interested in living quietly and peacefully apart from the world. But more importantly, the community's demographic structure undermines the claim that the group is dangerous. Out of approximately ninety members, about forty are children, and another twenty are over the age of fifty. Some of them are quite elderly. Half of the remaining thirty members are women or teenage girls, leaving a "fighting force" of about fifteen adult males and teenage boys.

Although we can only speculate, it appears that Elohim City's reputation as a terrorist training center stems from its open-door policy concerning visitors. Anyone who wants to visit is welcome, as long as one abides by the community's rules. Just as we were welcomed into the community with nothing more than a letter and

a phone call, so others have been allowed in without background checks that might have screened out people who later brought negative attention to the community. Moreover, reports of weapons training at Elohim City have lent credibility to the terrorist image. Whatever the truth behind the alleged connections with right-wing terrorists, those charges were beyond the scope of our study.

### **ELOHIM CITY IN RETROSPECT: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE**

As outsiders who are neither racist nor Identity believers, we were both repelled and attracted by Elohim City. Two incidents dramatized the contradictions we felt. The first occurred shortly after Delano and Shook arrived on their second visit. During an outing at the river, the skinheads and teenagers refused to use their usual swimming hole because of “niggers and Indians down there drinking and smoking dope.” At the next place they tried, two white women pulled up in a car with a mixed-race baby which the teens referred to as a “niglet.” Then two effeminate men arrived and took pictures of each other on the bridge, causing them to be labeled “fags.” Some of the teenagers openly made fun of them, and one skinhead approached them menacingly, while the other said, “This looks like it could be a hate crime in the making.” No violence erupted, but the men were told to leave, which they did. Shook and Delano felt ashamed because, as guests, all they could do was watch from the sidelines as the scene unfolded.

The second incident occurred the day Delano and Shook left Elohim City. Shook described that day’s meeting in her field notes:

Each family gave their testimonies and I almost started crying when I began mine. I thanked the community for being so generous. They fed and housed us. Talked to us about their personal beliefs. They even paid us to work. And we were strangers from Montana they didn’t know a thing about.

Once all the families gave their testimonies, Grampa asked Wes [Delano] if he’d like to speak. When he was through, they offered to put us in the “Secret Place” to be prayed for. It was like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. We kneeled down next to each other, and all the little children put their hands on us. Then all the adults and older kids stood in a circle around us. Grampa began to pray and other voices joined in. So many of them were speaking in tongues. I was crying by the end. There was such love in that room, and it was for us, for me. I really felt like I was part of something spiritual. When I stood up, I received a succession of hugs and invitations to come back. . . . It was like magic.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the Communal Studies Association in Tacoma, Washington, and the 1998 annual meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association in San Francisco. This version has benefited greatly from the valuable suggestions provided by *Nova Religio*'s anonymous reviewers.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 47-71.

<sup>3</sup> James Corcoran, *Bitter Harvest: The Birth of Paramilitary Terrorism in the Heartland* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Odinism is a pagan religion that views the Nordic race as the chosen race of nature. The religion worships the Norse gods, is opposed to Christianity, and hold religious festivals called "blots."

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood: Inside America's Racist Underground* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 84, 96, 120; Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 61-69.

<sup>6</sup> Jess Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow* (New York: Regan Books, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, 255-90; Morris Dees and James Corcoran, *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 30-67.

<sup>8</sup> Mark S. Hamm, *Apocalypse in Oklahoma: Waco and Ruby Ridge Revenged* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 198.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America*, 57-59. "Elohim City," *Dateline NBC* report, 30 May 1997.

<sup>10</sup> We wish to thank James Flightner, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, for funding this field trip. We also thank university attorney David Aronofsky and president George Dennison for supporting the trip in the face of stiff opposition from the university system's tort claims attorney.

<sup>11</sup> According to Millar, Elohim City uses the original Hebrew calendar, which he claims was supplanted during the Babylonian captivity.

<sup>12</sup> We conducted three formal, tape-recorded interviews—two with Millar and one with Jim Ellison. We also recorded a question-and-answer session about family life with several teenagers and two parents, but the rest of our information was gathered through informal conversations with members and our own observations. We did not use a consent form because members had collectively agreed to let us visit. Although a few members avoided us during our initial visit, neither Balch nor any of his students encountered any hostility.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, even small communities can conceal information from outsiders. As Erving Goffman points out in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1979), 47-65, group members frequently engage in "teamwork" to prevent the "leakage" of potentially embarrassing information.

<sup>14</sup> In his comments on the first draft of this paper, Millar stated that "the Confederate flag really predated any racial emphasis and is based on St. Andrew's cross, predating Columbus. To equate the flying of the Confederate flag [with racism] is either a liberal racist bias or a lack of knowledge of history of this ancient emblem." Undated

letter to Rob Balch, received 7 October 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, viii, ix, 4-5, 92, 129, 137, 186.

<sup>16</sup> James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 1990), 55-61; Flynn and Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood*, 45-71.

<sup>17</sup> Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, 121-47.

<sup>18</sup> Dees and Corcoran, *Gathering Storm*, 22-23, 88-89, 103-04; Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, 255-90.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Wessinger, "Millennialism With and Without the Mayhem," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 47-59.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, 104-12.

<sup>22</sup> This information comes from two interviews with Millar, one conducted by Balch on 20 March 1997, and the other by Stephan Langdon, a former student who drove up from New Orleans to take part in the spring break field trip, on 22 March 1997. Both interviews were conducted at Elohim City.

<sup>23</sup> Our data on these groups come from Balch's observations between 1991 and 1998. In addition to attending many Aryan Nations gatherings, Balch has participated in summer Bible camps sponsored by America's Promise and Peters' Church of Christ.

America's Promise is located in Sandpoint, Idaho. Dave Barley is the son-in-law of the late Sheldon Emry, a well-known Identity preacher who founded the Lord's Covenant Church in Phoenix, Arizona. America's Promise gained national attention in 1996 when three white supremacists with ties to Barley's church were arrested for a series of bank robberies and bombings in Spokane, Washington ("Three Suspected Phineas Priests Charged in Spokane Bombings," *Klanwatch Intelligence Report*, November 1996).

The Church of Christ, located in LaPorte, Colorado, is one of the largest and most influential Identity churches. Its multimedia ministry, Scriptures for America, includes radio and TV broadcasts, a web site, a mail order catalog, and a newsletter. Peters is best known for organizing the 1992 Estes Park Patriot meeting, which played a key role in the formation of the militia movement (Dees and Corcoran, *Gathering Storm*, 49-67).

<sup>24</sup> Roger Rusk, *The Other End of the World: An Alternative Theory Linking Prophecy and History* (Plano, TX: Le Book Company, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> Elohim City distinguishes between Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, citing Leviticus 23:5-6 where Moses is commanded to tell the people to celebrate these holidays on different days.

<sup>26</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 83-84.

<sup>27</sup> Tony Reinhart, "'Mellow' Compound Has Dark Underbelly," *The Record*, Kitchener, Ontario, 9 May 1997, 1A-3A.

<sup>28</sup> Millar had strong feelings about this incident: "That Balch would use information garnered as a result of him being granted open guest status in his proposed scholarly dissertation on 'Communities' WAS EXPECTED. That he would exploit his relationship to reveal to mass media intricate and potentially threatening personal arrangements was, and is, considered a breach of trust and extremely bad manners. The fact that Millar greets a man warmly reveals that he had no personal ill will toward those whose conduct he deems inappropriate." Undated letter to Rob Balch, received 7 October 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Gertrude Enders Huntington, "Children of the Hutterites," *Natural History* 90 (1981): 34-46.

<sup>30</sup> Upon reading this paragraph, Millar added that he did “not feel the man was justified,” and he claimed he “strongly opposes theft of any kind. . . . Store managers need to show a profit. Manufacturers need to pay employees; further, the something-for-nothing philosophy destroys character and grates on my sense of fairness.” Undated letter to Rob Balch, received 7 October 1997.